

# PROLETARIAN IDEOLOGY IN SELECTED NIGERIAN PLAYS: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS

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## ***Abstract***

*The focus of proletarian drama is on members of the working class and by extension, the masses. The research therefore, explores the ideological contributions, from the leftist perspective, espoused in Irobi's Nwokedi, Cemetery Road and Nwadigwe's Udoji. The justification behind this research work is hinged on the fact that not much critical attention has been paid to the selected plays from the standpoint of proletarian ideologies expressed in them. Therefore, this research work aims at contributing to knowledge in this direction. The research is mainly concerned with attempts made by the aforementioned Nigerian playwrights to use art to advance the cause of the downtrodden with a view to sensitizing and mobilizing them to come together and combat an oppressive system that holds them captive. Case study and content analysis approaches of the qualitative research method are adopted by the researcher. Primary sources of data include Nwokedi, Cemetery Road and Udoji. The secondary sources are books, journals, magazines and newspapers. It can be correctly said that the Marxist ideology of a classless society provides the foothold for the thematic and ideological viewpoints of the playwrights whose works have been used in this study. Marxism holds that the masses who Karl Marx refers to as the "exploited class" are "locked inevitably in conflict" with the bourgeoisie who exploit the masses since they own and control the means of production. Finally, the research work recommends responsible leadership as a duty that the leadership class owes the masses in order to bridge the gap between the "haves" and the "have-nots" in the society. The researcher also concludes that*

*drama is an indispensable tool for mass conscientisation, mobilization and transformation.*

## **Introduction**

The proletarian ideological viewpoints expressed by some Nigerian playwrights in their works, notably, Esiaba Irobi, Charles Nwadike, and even Ola Rotimi in his *Hopes of The Living Dead*, just to mention a few, derive mainly from Marxism. Marxism is a sociological concept that looks at social class in terms of people's relative standing with regards to education, their occupation income and wealth. In his conflict theory therefore, Karl Marx observed that peasants, otherwise, the proletariats, who had gone to work in the urban areas received wages that barely provided enough for them to feed. Shocked and dismayed at this suffering of the proletarian class, Marx began to study and analyze societies and their history. In so doing, he developed the Conflict Theory and concluded that human existence is characterized by endless class struggles which societies, including Nigeria, have continued to grapple with. According to Henslin:

...in each society, some small group of individuals controls the means of production and exploits those who do not. In industrialized societies, the struggle is between the bourgeoisie-the small group of capitalists who own the means to produce wealth and the proletariats-the mass of workers exploited by the bourgeoisie. The capitalists also control politics so that when workers rebel the capitalists are able to call on the powers of the state to control them.  
(27)

Marxism, therefore, provides a foothold for the proletarian ideologies expressed in the selected Nigerian plays. The proletarian ideologies projected in the plays provide veritable platforms for advancing the interests of the proletariats over those of the bourgeoisie class with all its exploitative tendencies which derive from capitalism as an economic system that has never been in the interest of the masses.

The proletarian ideology, although as earlier pointed out, has its origin in the writings of Karl Marx, it has been appropriated by some Nigerian playwrights because of the suitability of its ideological viewpoints to the class conflict that characterizes the relationship between the Nigerian proletarian class and members of the bourgeoisie class. The viewpoints expressed in the selected plays therefore, underline the determined efforts of the playwrights to enlighten, mobilize and encourage the masses to come together as group of oppressed people and combat the capitalist system entrenched and nurtured by the bourgeoisie class to ensure their continued reign of oppression and terror over the proletariats. Ngugi Wa Thiog'O and Micere Githal Mugo describe any theatrical attempts aimed at promoting the interests of the downtrodden as "good theatre which is on the side of the people, that which, without masking mistakes and weaknesses, gives people courage and urges them to higher resolves in their struggles for total liberation..." (v)

### **Proletarian Ideology in Irobi's *Nwokedi*, *Cemetery Road* and *Nwadiuwe's Udoji***

The play *Nwokedi*, is not a mere dramatization of violence and radicalism; but a reenactment of a people's struggles against oppression, corruption and exploitation which members of the bourgeoisie class who are also members of the ruling class unleash on the masses. Violence is evident in the play when the oppressed, exploited and short-changed youths both in Osisioma and Ugep come together to put an end to their suffering, exploitation and the

determination of the bourgeoisie and political class to continue to deny them the opportunity to realize their potentials.

The proletarian ideology expressed in *Nwokedi* by Irobi as a playwright who always pitches his tent with the masses is brought to the fore when the play opens to reveal the unemployed youths of Osioma who constitute the Ekumeku age grade, mobilizing themselves to confront their oppressors who they also regard as dishonest political leaders because they make promises during campaigns which they fulfill only in the breach. As part of their restoration agenda therefore, the youths show an uncommon determination to dethrone these old and expired politicians who have put in place a system that makes it possible for them to recycle themselves in positions of power or authority endlessly and dominate the political space to the detriment of the youths of the community. Recounting how her son, Nwokedi (Jnr), teamed up with the youths to bring about his father's downfall, Mrs. Nwokedi states that:

...standing beside me is a distinguished rogue, a political obscenity, a resourceful liar who thinks he can come here every four years and commandose us into selling our destiny to him. Before you, Ekumeku, is a high degree thief, a confidence trickster, a carapaced tortoise whose grey-haired generation has ruptured our future... This same crook standing here... summoned us like this four years ago... He promised us electric light, pipe-borne water and tarred roads... Where are the cables to bring the light, where are the electric poles, where are the taps, where are the roads, not to talk of the tar...he promised jobs... But as you can see, our job in this village is still to look for jobs. Is it not? (11).

These old politicians exemplified by Nwokedi (Snr.) have continued to dominate the political landscape in spite of the fact that over the years the only “accomplishment” or “achievement” they can point to is that they have consciously and consistently presided over the country’s slide into socio-economic and political quagmire. *Nwokedi* therefore, is a play that portrays the leadership class who make up the bourgeoisie class in present day Nigeria as dishonest and mischievous. They have failed the people of this country woefully hence the playwright encourages the masses, especially the unemployed youths to come together under one umbrella like we have the Ekumeku age grade of the unemployed youths of Osioma and wrest their bruised destinies from their oppressors, change the status quo and secure their future. According to Ozoemena, a character in the play and a member of the Ekumeku age grade:

Our time has come. And Time is not the tick-tock of your wristwatches. Neither is time the rising and setting of the sun. Time is event. Time is decision. Time is action. Time is when young men flex muscles of a new resolve and decide to change their fate. Decide to change the world. Change the course of history. Create a new order. That, my generation, is how time is made. And that, Mr. Nwakerendu Nwokedi is how time trips tyrants. (13)

In his comment on Irobi’s attempts at bringing about socio-political reforms through the medium of drama as an important art form, Ebo states that “...Esiaba Irobi prefers to lay bare the prevalent socio-political situation in his society... the likes of Irobi prod the citizenry to challenge the system and thus create radical changes in the society...” (84). In line with Ebo’s opinion, Irobi attempts to x-ray Nigeria’s socio-political environment by exposing

the corrupt tendencies of the bourgeoisie class in Nigeria. Arikpo and Nwokedi (Snr) exemplify the group of political bourgeoisie who dominate politics in Nigeria, having acquired their wealth through rotten means. A representational image of Nigerian politicians, Arikpo incurs the wrath of the unemployed youths in Ugep because over time, like a typical Nigerian wealthy politician, he consistently and intentionally fails to fulfill campaign promises he made to the electorates while soliciting their supports and votes during campaigns. When the youths become fed up with his dishonest ways, they mobilize and during protests, set his multibillion naira mansion ablaze. His aged parents perished in the inferno that engulfed his mansion. Arikpo's ill-will towards the youths of this country whose interests he is supposed to be projecting and protecting as an elected legislator coupled with his uncanny determination to ensure that youths are kept in perpetual subjugation is highlighted when he avers that:

We will not. Never... How can we abandon the destiny of this nation to a disco-going, hemp-smoking, beer-guzzling generation? We can't. in-law, politics is a serious business. It should not be left to louts loitering the streets like lost souls in search of financial salvation. Jobless vagabonds. An irresponsible generation. A brigade of unemployed devils... (15)

In the third cycle of the play, the same Arikpo disdainfully refers to youths who have been rendered jobless or unemployed by the very system that he and his co-political travelers contrived, as "political left-overs to compensate" (67).

The above statement by Arikpo underscores the game plan of the average Nigerian politician to ensure that the younger generation does not have the opportunity to play major roles in

governance. Meanwhile, it is instructive to note that these old politicians have run out of ideas on how a modern State like Nigeria grappling with the challenges that globalization has thrown its way, should be governed. For Nwokedi (Snr), his political misfortune starts when his son, Nwokedi (Jnr) leads the Ekumeku age grade to plot and ensure his father's defeat at the polls. The youths make sure that adequate support is given to a younger, less known political greenhorn, known as Ozoemena Nwakanma to enable him defeat Nwokedi (Snr) at the senatorial elections. Role playing Nwokedi (Jnr), Mrs. Nwokedi queries thus, "Shall we squat here with folded arms and watch our lives shrivel like coco yams between the paws of a disembodied entity, a trousered ape who has no dreams for anybody, including himself?" (11)

Earlier in the second circle of the play, Nwokedi (Jnr) is shown in the National Youth Service Corp orientation camp where he confronts the military authorities by resisting the orders of the soldiers which he considers unreasonable and thus, revolting against them. Awado, one of the soldiers in the orientation camp happens to be the first to be humiliated by Nwokedi (Jnr) in his collision with the military authorities. In a stage direction, the playwright gives a graphic description of how Awado becomes Nwokedi (Jnr's) first scape goat thus:

*(He strikes Nwokedi across the shoulder with the swagger stick. Nwokedi grabs it, breaks it into two equal parts and throws down the pieces. Suffering from loss of face, Awado hits Nwokedi across the face. Nwokedi hits back and they grapple. Nwokedi lifts him cleanly off his feet and thuds him to the ground, back-first. Sits across his chest and pummels him with blows). (27)*

The consequence of his confrontation with the authorities is that Nwokedi (Jnr) bolts out of the camp to return to his village to carry out, on behalf of his people, the cleansing ritual during the

annual Ekpe festival. On his arrival, he meets his brother-in-law, Arikpo, and confronts him over the tragic death of his sister and her children. This is because Nwokedi (Jnr) does not believe the story making the rounds as told by Arikpo, that his sister, Ezinne and her children died when they were “burnt to ashes by soldiers in the Ugep disaster” (14). Nwokedi also confronts his father, (Nwokedi Snr) and during a heated argument, it is revealed that Ezinne and her three children were actually sacrificed by her husband, Arikpo, for political power. In the words of Nwokedi (Jnr), Arikpo “used them as ingredients of a ritual sacrifice to fortify his political career” (63). This startling and unsettling discovery puts Nwokedi (Jnr) and Ekumeku age grade on the one hand and the leadership class represented by Arikpo and Nwokedi (Snr) on the other, on a collision course. Thus with the active support of the Ekumeku age grade, Nwokedi (Jnr) sacrifices his father, Nwokedi (Snr) and Arikpo at the village square after slaying the sacrificial ram for cleansing during the Ekpe festival. Nwokedi (Jnr) states his reason for taking the steps that he has taken to cleanse the society of corrupt politicians and rescue the future of the youths of his community from the vice grip of the unscrupulous bourgeoisie political class:

My generation gave you the future to hold in trust for us. You turned it into an handkerchief, used it to wipe the mucus of greed dripping from your wretched nostrils. After that you rumbled it, crumpled our future and squeezed it into your pocket. But your pocket was full of holes. So our future fell out to the ground. And with your leperous feet, you quarried it into dust... that is why this matchet must spill your blood today... (73)

As a playwright who is committed to waging sustained war against corruption and other socio-political ills plaguing the society through the medium of drama, Irobi exposes the bourgeoisie class which also make up the political class as being corrupt and

insensitive to the plight of the masses. He reminds or informs the audience of their dishonest nature, in and out of office. They are never tired of seeking elective positions and other means of fortifying their entrenched positions in the society just for their own personal aggrandizement and self-enrichment. Their aspiration to elective positions, therefore, is not borne of the desire to render selfless services to the people. It is in the light of the foregoing that the playwright uses Arikpo to expose the extent of damage that the political and the bourgeoisie class has done to this country. In his confession, Arikpo states that:

They said I built it with stolen money, political money, corrupt money, the voters' money. They said I didn't perform in my first term of office... That as a senator I should have made laws which would abolish unemployment in this nation. Imagine that, in-law. What one man can bull-doze the senate into manufacturing jobs for the jobless multitudes parading the myriad streets of this nation? (4).

The above statement by Arikpo reveals how easily politicians betray the voters' confidence in them by reneging on the promises they make while campaigning, especially with regards to creating genuine youth empowerment policies and programs, creating employment opportunities for the youths and providing social amenities such as electricity, pipe-borne water, good roads, free or subsidized quality medical care or services, and so on. Most times, these politicians willfully breach these campaign promises, believing that the masses do not have the means to call them to order. But in *Nwokedi*, the playwright conscientizes the masses that their vote is their power. Arikpo's and Nwokedi's political downfall is carefully plotted and executed by the youths who have the majority votes just to teach the bourgeoisie political class a bitter lesson which is that the masses have the means to hold them accountable. Arikpo discloses that the youths even warned him not to bother to contest. According to Arikpo:

And for this leprous... for that senseless reason, they wrote me a letter ordering me not to run for a second term of office. In the letter, they said they had selected one jobless young man who studied law, one lizard whose father is a bicycle repairer, and so poor that he could not set up a chamber for his son; they said they had selected the red-necked agama lizard to replace me at the senate... In the final paragraph they said I should not campaign this political season... I ignored their lousy letter and campaigned... went into Ugep Township Square to hold a rally. But what happened before I got to my house? It had been shattered from wall to wall, brick by brick. No single block was standing ... I crawled into the car to drive to the police station but somewhere around Ugep Township Cemetery, the hooligans waylaid me. They smashed my windscreen with a thousand stones. Dragged me out and dealt me these cuts with pieces of broken glass. Some used daggers. Others, machetes. This wound... was carved with an axe. (4)

While role playing Nwokedi (Jnr), Mrs. Nwokedi reveals to the audience, reasons the youths have for taking up arms against non-performing and corrupt leaders represented by Arikpo and Nwokedi (Snr). According to Mrs. Nwokedi:

... He promised us electric light, pipe-borne water and tarred roads... where are the cables to bring the light, where are the electric poles, where are the taps, where are the roads not to talk of the tar?... he promised jobs... He said once we vote him into the Parliament, he would make sure that every young man in this village gets a job. But as you can see, our job in this village is still to look for jobs. Is it not? (11)

The playwright, in his desire to see succor brought to the masses is able to incite them to take a stand against their oppressors. This is revealed in the following dialogue as Mrs. Nwokedi once again role-plays Nwokedi (Jnr):

Mrs. Nwokedi: Shall we squat here with folded arms and watch our lives shrivel like Coco yams between the paws of a disembodied entity, a trousered ape Who has no dreams for anybody including himself?

Ekumeku: No.

Mrs. Nwokedi: Shall we sit here and watch our future shrink like the meat of a tiger in the pot of a roguish hunter?

Ekumeku: No.

Mrs. Nwokedi: ... My generation, we are the only possible alternative. We are the last human frontiers to the marauding monsters and bleating beasts devouring our lives daily. We are tomorrow. In our hands are the batons of our destiny. In our arms are the barriers of a rumpled future. Between our fingers burn the tapers and the flames of a new life. In our eyes gleam the light of dawn. We are tomorrow and tomorrow is us. We must... we shall now select somebody, a younger man with a virile vision to represent us at the parliament... (12)

As a playwright, Irobi is a custodian of the conscience of the society. He is appalled by the denigrating poverty of the masses who suffer all manner of deprivations in the midst of abundance simply because the leadership class has entrenched a system that enables them and members of their families to enrich themselves and feed fat on the resources of the country. In *Cemetery Road*, one of his plays, this playwright acknowledges that the masses of this country struggle on a daily basis against bad, insensitive and irresponsible bourgeoisie political class. He states that:

The peasants are... daily humiliated by the snobbery of the ruling class which is modeled on... upper middle class. The military leaders who were trained in Sandhurst... the civilian politicians; the everlasting donkeys of democracy in a country where democracy means a government of demons by demons and for demons...(43)

The play presents Anyanwu, a University lecturer in Theatre Arts, as a social critic who is always on the side of the people in his genuine efforts to help them combat the rampaging tendencies of the ruling class. The playwright's genuine desire to bring about a corrupt-free Nigerian society and in the process, ensure that the wellbeing of the proletariat is protected by ensuring that every government official is made to account for every penny leads Anyanwu to confront and successfully frustrate the government official's attempt to short-change the peasants of Kudingi who he is supposed to pay fifteen thousand naira each as compensation for their farmlands which the government has taken from them to build a barrack, a hotel and a dam. Anyanwu discovers that the government official "has erased out two zeros" and that the "weapons you use are the pen, the computer and the eraser". He succeeds in revealing to the audience the instruments that fraudsters in government use to rob the masses, plunder the economy and enrich themselves in their uncanny ambition to belong to the bourgeoisie class, thus reminding us of the numerous corruption scandals in Nigeria such as the famous *Dasukigate*, on how millions of dollars meant to procure arms for Nigerian soldiers to enable them combat insurgents who have declared war on Nigeria, were allegedly shared by the leadership class and their cronies; the crude oil theft, the tale of a snake swallowing millions of Nigeria in Abuja, Nigeria's Federal Capital, among other fraud scandals. These instruments are meant to enhance efficiency in the public service as public servants render service to the public but unfortunately, they have, instead, become instruments for pillaging

the economy. Having succeeded in frustrating the government official from cheating the peasants and robbing them of their actual entitlements as government's approved compensation, Anyanwu sums up the total amount of money that this government official has stolen thus:

... About one million naira plus one thousand and some fraction naira he has taken from the compensation money of each Kudingi peasant. Multiply that by the thousands he has robbed from so many other dispossessed peoples of this country. A sympathetic estimate would be ten million naira. (37)

Apart from corruption with all its adverse and destructive effects on the country's economy, other indicators of attempts by the bourgeoisie class to keep the proletarian class permanently subjugated are through unemployment and non-payment of workers' salaries by the government. The playwright has therefore, successfully prepared the minds of the Nigerian audience who are not from the privileged class, especially Nigerian University students, that when they graduate, irrespective of their classes of degrees, securing jobs will be as difficult as the biblical head of a Carmel passing through the eye of a needle. And even if they are lucky enough to secure jobs, their salaries will hardly be paid regularly and where they are paid at all, they will still be in debts and live in abject poverty because of the weakness of the Nigerian currency which makes it impossible for workers' salaries to "take them home." Irobi states that:

And that even if you are paid your salaries, you will still be in debts because your salaries as University graduates cannot pay your rent, give you food, provide you clothes and still allow you go out with your boyfriends or girlfriends to Sheraton or Nicon Neo Hotel. (83)

The play exposes the disturbing fact that the plight of the proletarian class as an outcome of the system contrived by the highly flamboyant and insensitive bourgeoisie class is aggravated by the tendency of the same bourgeoisie class to continue to hold and keep the proletariats in chains. This situation of slavery is sustained by the continued attempts to deny the masses what naturally belongs to them. These include decent shelter, sound education, basic social amenities, and so on. In modern day Nigeria, provision of basic social amenities such as motorable roads, pipe-borne water, etc, is almost nil. The playwright strives to enlighten the masses that their leaders who make up the bourgeoisie class corruptly enrich themselves since they are often in control of the means of production, and by extension, the economy and while at the same time impoverishing the masses in order to perpetuate servitude among the masses. He however, enjoins them to stand up to their oppressors, emphatically stating that:

So you have to tell the assholes who stand between you and what rightly belongs to you in this country what you think of them... my friends, this is your chance to tell the Empire of Hyenas who call themselves The Ruling Military Council of this country what fucking assholes you think of them.  
(83)

*Udoji* by Charles Nwadiuwe is a play about the British Colonial Policy of Indirect Rule System. To ensure the success of the policy, the British government appointed Warrant Chiefs to play the role of intermediaries between the Crown in London and the natives. The Warrant Chiefs were to entertain and settle minor disputes like conflicts arising from boundary disputes between or among communities. The major disputes which the Warrant Chiefs could not settle were referred to the District Officer for adjudication. In the play, Mr. Paddler is the District Officer while Chief Udoji is the Warrant Chief appointed by Mr. Paddler to oversee the affairs of the people of Ndiagu.

The play presents the audience with Mr. Paddler, Chief Udoji and those that he has appointed to spy on their people and report to him. They are Nnalue, Udeze, Ibe and Onuora as belonging to the leadership, nay the bourgeoisie class while the four notable elders of Ndiagu, known as Egwuonwu, Oko, Ezinwa and Nnaji who mobilise and lead the people of Ndiagu to vehemently oppose and resist the corrupt and dictatorial tendencies of Chief Udoji, together with the entire people of Ndiagu, belong to the proletarian class. These are the people who Chief Udoji and his four agents arbitrarily exploit by imposing and making them pay all manner of taxes and levies. Chief Udoji's appointment is opposed by the people of Ndiagu because they see him as being unqualified to lead them. Their main reason is that he is an untitled son of a man known as Anaemeka who committed all manner of atrocities against his people including raping the village priestess before his inglorious end and burial in the evil forest.

The play is metaphorical in the sense that the playwright strives to enlighten the audience that with mere strength of popular will the people can triumph over injustice, oppression and corruption perpetrated against them by the leadership class. The people's opposition to the appointment of Chief Udoji championed by four notable elders of Ndiagu, namely, Egwuonwu, Oko, Ezinwa and Nnaji is an indication that opinion leaders in any society have very vital roles to play in mobilizing the masses against perceived acts of injustice perpetrated against the people by their leaders. This is achieved by ensuring that the right thing is done in the interest of the masses. The following dialogue among the aforementioned elders underscores the efforts of the Ndiagu elders to corrects the ills plaguing their community:

Egwuonwu: And if we want a king, we all know who can be king. Why should the Whiteman choose and impose a king over us?

Ezinwa: The act itself is sacrilegious. Does the Whiteman expect us to abandon Ezedu, our

age-long deity and transfer our allegiance to a nonentity like Udoji?

Oko: ...the question that baffles me is, why Udoji of all people? Why the son of a rapist who died of an abominable disease? Have we forgotten the scandalous circumstance surrounding the death of Anaemeka the father of Udoji?

Nnaji: My people, I did not stand up to retell a story which we all know too well but to point out the enormity of the situation. Our elders say that a man carrying the carcass of an elephant does not dig for cricket with the toes of his feet. Let us deal with the people of Amanato first. Later we tackle the son of Anaemeka because an untitled son of a rapist has no business talking to us at all... (11)

Chief Udoji is a representational image of the type of leaders that dominate the leadership space in the African continent. The playwright portrays Chief Udoji as a corrupt leader who pockets the money meant to compensate the people of Ndiagu for their crops and economic trees destroyed during road construction as well as the wages of the labourers hired to work on the new road. He imposes levies and taxes illegally and arbitrarily and pockets the money for his private use. He also attempts to change or divert the course of the new road just to favor himself alone and at the risk of desecrating the people's deity as it would have passed through the shrine of Ezedu. He also decrees that:

...Henceforth, no village assembly shall take place without my approval. In fact such assemblies shall be headed by me. The people will mention the issues at stake, we discuss it, then I will consult the Whiteman and then give them feedback... my people are swollen-headed. They need an iron hand to

control them... I have the police force round the clock and I will deal with defaulters ruthlessly. I have instructed the police to disrupt any illegal assembly... (54)

The above statement by Chief Udoji portrays him as a leader with dictatorial tendencies. Dictatorship is a major characteristic of the bourgeoisie class in Africa. Nigerian governments have over time, often exhibited this tendency to deny the people their inalienable right to freedom of expression and assembly. Chief Udoji's avowed intention to ensure that no village meetings take place without his approval is akin to the methods of members of the bourgeoisie class, who also occupy leadership positions in Nigeria, of gagging the press and by implication denying the generality of the people access to vital and credible information in order to keep the masses uninformed about goings-on within government circles.

Chief Udoji's decision to sell the communal land that has been ear-marked and reserved for the settlement of victims of natural disasters, helpless widows and orphans goes to underline quite lucidly how easily the "haves" dispossess the "have nots" of their highly prized possessions because of abuse of power and corruption. Chief Udoji even alludes to the premium placed on the land by the people but still goes ahead to sell it. He states that "it is a communal land; set aside for victims of natural disasters, helpless widows and orphans. Nobody is supposed to touch that land except by communal approval. So I am taking a risk..." (56). In their reaction, the villagers describe Chief Udoji's decisions to sell the land and postpone the new yam festival as impracticable. One of them declares that "something drastic has to be done. We have to clip Udoji's wings before he flies too high". This statement is a clear indication that the villagers' feeling of discontent with Chief Udoji is getting to a boiling point and therefore, they are getting ready for a showdown with him in order to put an end to his reign of terror and oppression. The Second and Third Villagers state that:

Second Villager: There is a limit to human endurance. Otherwise it will be taken as cowardice. Unless a man fights those who pass through his compound to go and defecate, they will not stop...

Third Villagers: We must react. If a man does not act as if he's mad, he will never get a share of his sister's dowry... (39)

The above statements are obvious reactions against Chief Udoji's imposition of additional ten cowries to be paid by each indigene of Ndiagu after they had paid thirty cowries each. Ejike the town crier, a character in the play, informs the audience that: "I was told to tell all the men to make a fresh contribution of ten cowries each so that Chief Udoji can appease the Whiteman and persuade him to change the course of the road..." (38)

Meanwhile, Chief Udoji has not been able to account for the taxes and levies that the villagers have paid in the past towards the road project. Yet he has continued to devise ways and means of extorting more money from the people. One of the ways and means of extorting more money from the masses is to cook up the story that the additional ten cowries that he has imposed to be paid by each villager is to "appease the Whiteman and persuade him to change the course of the road" (38). Meanwhile, he is the person who has made attempts to change the course of the road to pass through the shrine of Ezedu for his own benefit. But unfortunately for him, at this stage, the people have learnt to take everything that comes from him with a pinch of the salt which is they probe every information that comes from Chief Udoji and "members of his cabinet." And as such it is very easy for them to see through his criminal intentions behind the latest information from him through Ejike the town crier. The Third Villager states thus: "I smell conspiracy in the whole thing. We know that Udoji's house is not far from the shrine and if you look at that road very well, you will

see that it is gradually losing its straightness and is veering towards the shrine...” (39)

The playwright has by this revelation from the Third Villager passed a very vital message to the bourgeoisie class that it is becoming increasingly difficult in recent times, to continue to deceive and swindle the people of their hard earned money. Secondly that members of the bourgeoisie class may have their built their houses in government reserved areas, occupy senate chambers or legislative chambers both at the state and national levels, where they hold sessions and strategize on how to exploit the masses, the people on their own have platforms, such as the village square where they also meet to deliberate on policies and pronouncements from their oppressors’ corners. And that during such deliberations in village squares, there are among the masses, peasants who are intelligent enough to see through the deceits and lies of the bourgeoisie. Such intelligent peasants are able to point the way forward for the generality of the people.

During the uprising that eventually follows, the people are able to catch up with and apprehend Chief Udoji and Mr. Backspoon while Mr. Paddler is lucky enough to escape through the back exit of his official residence. Nnaji, one of the elders of Ndiagu announces to the audience that “their master has escaped. But we have these ones. And we shall deal with them the usual way. Take them to the evil forest”. The Ndiagu uprising against the District Officer, Mr. Paddler and his Warrant Chief, Chief Udoji successfully brings to an end the corrupt regime of Chief Udoji. The playwright uses the uprising to sound a note of warning to the bourgeoisie class and also remind the audience of John Locke’s Social Contract Theory which states that “... all governments and legislators were agents of the people and could be dismissed if they failed to perform the services for which they were appointed”. Or selected as is usually the case in Nigeria. This view is obviously held strongly by the people of Ndiagu hence they are able to come together in an organized manner to confront and dethrone their

oppressors, thus bringing the much desired changes in their situation.

### **Conclusion:**

Playwrights, like all writers, are custodians of the conscience of the society. The common thread that runs through the works of Irobi and Nwadike in *Nwokedi*, *Cemetery Road* and *Udoji*, respectively, is that they treat the themes of corrupt enrichment by the bourgeoisie class who also occupy leadership positions in Nigeria which enables them to wield and exercise tremendous powers over the masses. As mirrors of the present day Nigerian society, the plays' clear statement of fact is that our failure to attain egalitarianism even at over sixty years as an independent state, can be attributed to what Gbilekaa refers to as "...the lack of purposeful leadership; the desire to carve for ourselves personal empires or domains of influence; the lack of political awareness among the lower class and a lack of understanding of the true nature of class relations..." (165)

The plays also show that with purposeful leadership, the type exhibited by Nwokedi, the Ekumeku age grade, Anyanwu and the elders of Ndiagu, the victory of the masses over tyranny and oppression is guaranteed. A good leader of people must be courageous, resolute and bold to be able to challenge an oppressive system with a view to making desirable changes. Nwokedi (Jnr) confronts the military establishment and humiliates a member of the dreaded military institution; leads the youths of Osioma to confront dishonest and corrupt politicians represented by Arikpo and his father, Nwokedi (Snr) and ensure their humiliation at the polls and eventually, their death by sacrificing them, to at least, begin the process of cleansing the society of rotten eggs. Irobi and Nwadike recommend the leadership qualities exhibited by Nwokedi (Jnr), Anyanwu and the elders of Ndiagu for emulation by present day youth leaders, opinion leaders and elders in our various communities. The audience has been sensitized through these plays that positive changes in a people's situation can be brought about by

the oppressed people themselves who must make up their minds that they have the means to change the situation of inequalities that they have found themselves with the bourgeoisie class lording it over them in a system that is supported and sustained by the combined forces of history and capitalism as a system that the downtrodden finds very unjust.

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